

Why Care About Farm Labor?

~~Feudalism~~ Throughout most of the Western world, feudalism died some hundreds of years ago. It still exists, in a real sense, in certain parts of the United States -- including California. Caste systems have been legally abolished in "underdeveloped" countries. ~~/~~a caste system thrives, with the ~~full~~ knowledge and support of the legal establishment, in our own State.

This nearest approach to a functional caste within our society is drawn, not along cultural, religious, lingual, or racial lines, but along occupational lines. It is composed of workers in the industry of agriculture. It is a caste in the sociological and psychological senses. It is a caste in the sense that ~~administer~~ the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government, at local, State, and Federal levels, are engaged directly or indirectly in enforcing its perpetuation. It is a caste in the sense that, for one hundred years, for most of those trapped within the system there has been no exit.

Imagine for a moment that State and Federal child labor laws applied impeccably or not at all to the coal mining industry, and that little children were still used in digging coal as they were fifty years ago. Imagine that the National Fair Labor Standards Act specifically excluded this industry -- meaning that there was no minimum wage, no overtime provisions, no other wage and hour protections. Imagine that coal miners lived in wretched company towns, and that State FEP legislation excluded them. Imagine that the mine operators offered wages of 40¢ to \$1.00 per hour, and that the U.S. Government was obligated to supply contract workers from depressed overseas areas to fill ~~any~~ jobs which were unfilled at such wage levels. Imagine that the nation's labor-management relations legislation guaranteed workers the right to organize and bargain collectively -- in every industry but coal mining. And imagine that ~~public~~ tax-supported employment officers were required by a court order to recruit workers specifically for the purpose of breaking a coal miners' strike.

If ~~the~~ all these things were true -- if, indeed, any one of them were true -- the reaction from student, labor, and libertarian groups would probably dwarf anything that has happened in the last six months' wave of social concern. But, of course, the imagination cannot accept the above possibilities. We know that our society has progressed to the point such things could not occur in the coal mining industry -- or in steel, wholesale or retail trade, government employment, lumbering, longshoring, construction, the automobile industry, or any other industry. We know that our society guarantees equal protection of the law.

Or does it?

Every one of the above situations, which we have asked the reader to try to imagine, is true in one industry -- only one industry -- agriculture.

Strictly in Bentham's utilitarian terms, we consider the caste system which persists in ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~and~~~~xx~~ agriculture one of the great issues before our society -- one of the major pieces of America's unfinished business. We do not know of any domestic social problem which directly affects so many human beings. There are about 2,500,000 hired farm laborers in the country. Assuming they have an average of three dependents, we begin with a nucleus of 10,000,000 people. There are, in addition, about 4,000,000 low-income farmers in the country: sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and others. ~~xxx~~ Since they provide their own labor, they are in effect competing in the farm labor market with hired workers. They are members in full standing of the agricultural caste system. Assuming, once again, three dependents per breadwinner, we have an additional 16,000,000 to add to the nucleus ~~with~~~~xx~~~~xx~~~~x~~ of 10,000,000 persons with which we began. But we cannot stop yet. Approximately 500,000 foreign contract workers are employed in American agriculture each year. A recent survey revealed that these workers had an average of six dependents: a total of 3,500,000 more people directly affected by the system.

In California alone, nearly 2,500,000 individuals are caught in the system. In this State, as in the country as a whole, it is safe to say that approximately one in every six ~~xxxxx~~ persons is trapped within the agricultural labor caste.

But we do not suggest ~~that~~ a numerical test for the assessment of the severity of a social problem. We are even more concerned by the ways in which human lives are affected, and the extent to which they are affected. If there were a pocket, ~~xxxxx~~ not of 30,000,000 persons, but of "only" 30,000 held in a quasi-captive, quasi-feudal condition -- or "only" 300 -- or "only" 3 -- we should still cry halt. The vital point is that the erosion of human lives affects not only those whose lives are eroded, those who permit the erosion to occur. And "every one of us."

This would be difficult to endure in any event. It is particularly difficult to endure inasmuch as farm workers are, in fact, the most important group of workers in this or any other society. Societies have survived without automobile industries, without coal, without steel. They have even survived without aircraft and missiles. But they have never survived without food. The agricultural workers~~silk~~ picking peaches in the ~~maximimum~~ California's Central Valley as this is written are much too busy trying to earn a living to spend much time philosophizing. But it must ~~now~~ occur to them now and again, at one level of awareness or another, that they are engaged in a vital work -- a work which should confer great dignity and respect. Yet society tells them they have no dignity and do not deserve respect.

In the face of such humiliation, farm workers may do one of two things. First, they may attempt to flee agriculture entirely. This is difficult to do. If they succeed, the caste system, ~~farm~~ from cracking, hardens. For every American citizen who leaves farm labor or low income farming makes room for a foreign contract worker whose contract, enforced by the majesty of the U.S. Government, binds him in the equivalent of indentured servitude.

The second alternative available to members of the agricultural caste is to become gradually worn down by the system, until they accept the proposition they are unworthy of respect. This destruction of the sense of self-worth is the ultimate damage which the industry of agriculture, assisted by the larger society, wreaks upon farm laborers.

If agriculture, particularly as we know it in California, is to deserve to survive, it must be changed from an institution which ^{systematically} destroys human dignity to an institution in which human dignity is at least permitted to endure. We hope it can become -- more: an institution in which dignity is systematically nurtured and developed.

The human damage which marks the industry of agriculture assumes a number of forms. Sheer poverty itself warps human lives, particularly in an opulent economy such as our own, in which the disinherited are able to observe daily the contrast between their condition and that of the rest of society. Average yearly earnings of the agricultural ~~maximum~~ workers, ~~maximum~~ sharecroppers, and tenant farmers are less than \$900 -- about one-fifth the annual earnings of workers in other basic industries.

In a desperate effort to increase their incomes, many farm workers migrate from place to place, trying to reach a sequence of harvests at the peak of the season. This effort is often vain, owing to vagaries of the weather; the chaos of the farm labor market; and the heavy outlays for transportation and living arrangements which migrants must make. But, entirely apart from economic considerations, migrancy, ~~maximum~~ as it is found within the agricultural caste, is a dehumanizing ~~maximum~~ way of life. Migratory farm laborers are usually ineligible for social services. They are usually ineligible to vote. Their children receive interrupted and inadequate education -- or no education at all. And, always, there is terrible loneliness -- the absence of social participation and human involvement. Man becomes fully human only through secure relationships with others; conversely, he loses a part of his essential humanity if he is denied the opportunity for such relationships.

Most important of all, the lives of agricultural workers -- migrants and non-migrants alike -- are stunted and blighted by the ~~the~~ overwhelming indignity which flows inevitably from the unique legislative exclusions already reviewed. American society-at-large, through its elected representatives, says to farm workers, in effect, "You are less important to us than any other group in the country. We care less about you when you migrate than do about migratory birds and fish. We care less way you are treated than we care about livestock. We ask only that you care for our food. Beyond that --"

Agriculture, we say, must be changed, and changed quickly. Which brings us to the final reason why we believe the farm labor issue deserves the concern of every Californian and every American, rural or urban dweller, adult or student. The farm labor problem is unique in the degree to which something direct and tangible can be done about it.

Wherever we may live in
in a climactic form California, industrialized agriculture exists almost literally in our back yards. The situation, then, is uniquely close at hand. But, what is more, solutions are also uniquely close at hand. The Central Valley of California has been chosen by the American labor movement as the starting point for the first truly serious drive in history to organize an agricultural workers' union. This development points toward the way toward justice for farm workers not only in this area, but throughout the entire country.

The first and most basic way in which students and other concerned citizens of California can contribute to the farm labor movement is to enter the farm labor market ~~for~~ themselves for a day, for a weekend, for a summer vacation, for whatever time they can spare. Let them go to the corner of Market and Commerce Streets in Stockton at four o'clock in the morning, ^{and} mingle with the 1,500 farm workers who try to obtain employment there through the primitive shape-up which ~~exists~~ ^{exists} in ~~the~~ ^{the} County labor contractors and the State Department of Employment operate. Let them "hire on", if they are able, and go out to a field or vineyard or orchard ~~on~~ on a labor contractor's bus. Let them pull, top, and sack onions; cut grapes; thin sugar beets; weed and cultivate vegetables; pick tomatoes, peaches, apricots, cherries, or whatever is in season. Let them experience for themselves the working conditions which obtain in agriculture. Let them have the experience of being displaced by foreign contract workers. Let them see for themselves the sort of earnings which are possible under the piece rate system.

During some periods of the year, jobs in agriculture are scarce. Job-hunting at such times would in itself be instructive. But at other periods, the farm labor market is, in its present chaotic state, almost infinitely elastic. For example, San Joaquin County agriculture alone, during the early fall harvest peak, could ~~maxim~~ probably absorb every student from the Berkeley campus of the University of California.

The usefulness of direct participation in the farm labor market would ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ lie in at least two directions~~//~~. In the first place, participants would quickly become better informed about actual conditions than they could possibly become informed from second-hand sources. To the extent they were informed, they would be equipped to inform others. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, participants could aid directly in the servicing of field workers' needs in the field, which is among the most important preliminary steps toward ~~xxxxxxxx~~ organization and ~~xxxxxxxx~~ the justice which will follow only from organization. Many farm workers are either too demoralized, or too frantic to scratch out a living, to ^{spend the time required to} press their claims when they have a grievance. On any given day, there is hardly a crew of farm workers in the State which does not have a legitimate grievance or set of grievances. Until such time as these workers' needs can be processed by professional workers' representatives, volunteers can play a large and vital role in the reconstruction of the farm labor market.

In likelihood, relatively few students and other concerned Californians will be able to spend extended periods of time in the fields. There is much they can do to assist the farm labor movement from Berkeley, San Francisco, Palo Alto, Los Angeles, or wherever they may be studying, working, or keeping house. For one thing, as suggested above, they can assist in the enormous task of public education. Through speakers' bureaus, they can talk to civic, religious, political, and other groups. They can show slides and motion picture

They can arrange meetings at which Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee representatives will appear. They can prepare and distribute leaflets and other literature.

For another thing, they can support the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee if and when the Committee becomes involved in labor disputes. Students and others can engage in sympathy picketing. They can organize consumer boycotts. They can contribute goods and services to strike funds.

For still another thing, concerned Californians can participate in important forms of political action. For example, in ~~the~~^{1st} August, 1960, session, the U.S. Senate will consider the question of whether or not the importation of contract workers from Mexico shall continue through June, 1963. (The House has already passed such legislation.) A handful of Senators, such as Paul Douglas and Eugene McCarthy, intend to try to defer action on this proposal until next Spring, when it can receive the careful scrutiny it deserves. The liberal bloc will need all the support it can get. Maximum pressure should be brought to bear on California's two Senators. Next Winter and Spring, when both the U.S. Congress and California Legislature are in session, there will be great opportunities for political action, both in supporting constructive legislation and opposing that which would perpetuate or further weaken the present disadvantaged position of agricultural laborers.

The farm labor movement is essentially a movement toward the inheritance of the disinherited; a movement toward fundamental human rights, including the right to a decent livelihood, the rights of equal protection of the law, education, the franchise, self-organization, and, ultimately, the respect of one's associates, one's employer, one's society -- and one's self.

Since we care about human rights, we care about farm labor. And ~~something~~ are doing something about it.